

Why Have You Abandoned Me? Sunday, 1/24/21

Psalm 22 is more typically a text we'd read for Lent, because it includes that striking question offered by Jesus from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me!"¹ But before we jump to Jesus, let's consider first the raw intensity of this psalm from a strictly human perspective, especially the perspective of someone experiencing the kind of distress metaphorically described by these words that were written roughly a thousand years before the life of Jesus.

The portion of Psalm 22 we heard today consists largely of lament. It's not the kind of lament that's idly dropped in conversation today, like, "Man, the internet was down all morning and I couldn't read my email!" By comparison, that's just whining. Lament is more existential, more gut wrenching and more central to the very meaning of our existence. What does that look like? The Psalmist paints a variety of word pictures that seem a little strange to our modern ears, but let's listen for the heart of the experience underlying the words.

He describes being surrounded by enemies as if they were fierce bulls. Have you ever seen a bull, up close and personal? A bull weighs as much as a ton, that's 2,000 pounds, or ten to fifteen times as much as a human adult. They have sharp horns on their heads and a single bull is quite capable of goring someone to death. Now imagine being surrounded by them, all of them bent on your destruction! Would your heart be pounding in your chest? Would you faint? What thoughts would be racing through your head? Would you try to run away, or would you freeze in terror?

How about lions? Most of us will never see a lion outside of a zoo or our television. Yet lions have eaten and still do eat people. These beasts are as large as 400 pounds, killing their prey by pulling them down from behind and then biting down on the throat and strangling the victim.² The Psalmist compares his enemies to lions, describing their roar that precedes their "tearing into their prey."³ There's nothing gentle about the way a lion eats their prey. I once watched a hawk eat a bluebird in my backyard, and I could hear the ripping sound echo across the lawn as the hawk tore strips of muscle and flesh from the carcass with

¹ Psalm 22:1. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lion#Description>

³ Psalm 22:13. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

its hooked beak until there was nothing left of the bluebird but a stray feather or two. This isn't merely a bad day the psalmist is describing in Psalm 22. This is mortal terror. Can you imagine being the prey? Have you ever felt like that, about to be attacked by overwhelming and irresistible enemies?

And in case we don't get the picture, the psalmist goes on to further describe the feeling. It's as if your bones are out of joint, he writes. That sounds painful enough, but one commentator notes that the Hebrew words really point to something even more grotesque: My bones are "scattered about...as when a predatory pack has devoured a victim and each member of the pack carries off its share."⁴ That's about as finished as one could possibly be, right? But there's more.

The psalmist has no hope and no courage, saying that his heart has melted within him. We may not use those same words today, but can you imagine the desolation that might lead you to describe a crushed and hopeless spirit? Have you ever cried out to God in bitter lament like this, saying, "You have laid me in the dust and left me for dead?"⁵

But surely the most bitter part of the lament is at its root; Not the suffering per se so much as the utter lack of hope evident in the belief that God is nowhere to be found. "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"⁶ Surely that must be a universal human experience, feeling utterly abandoned and alone, with no hope of rescue.

The question of God's abandonment betrays the profound contradiction that we all realize when our experiences in the face of tragedy and trial don't match what we believe about God. After all, haven't we read and been taught that if only we'll trust in God and obey God's commands, God will deliver us? What does that mean to a grieving widow, parent, or child, for example, whose loved ones are suddenly and irrevocably snatched from their lives? Oftentimes, the trials we face are temporary, and we eventually see enough days pass to be able to recognize that God has in fact been present all along and has been faithful to deliver us from our trouble. That seems to be the case for the author of Psalm 22, who goes on in the last part of the psalm to join the community of other believers in praising

⁴ The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament, p. 523 (Intervarsity, 2000)

⁵ Psalm 22:15. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

⁶ Psalm 22:1. Ibid

God's deliverance from his enemies. But what about the times when God doesn't deliver us from our enemies or other trials? Does God truly abandon us, leaving us without hope, even in the face of the ultimate enemy itself, death? To answer that question, let's skip ahead 1,000 years to the cross of calvary, as Jesus borrows the words of the psalmist and breathes new life into their meaning. I'm reading from the Gospel of Matthew, the 27th chapter, beginning with verse 35 in the New Living Translation.

{Read Matthew 27:35-50 NLT}

It was no accident that Jesus chose Psalm 22 to appropriate for his cry of anguish to his Father. Why did he do so? One commentator suggests that Jesus did this to underscore the drama of God coming into creation and experiencing the same terror of mortality that the psalmist shared and is so fundamental to the human experience.⁷ Jesus understands what it means to be encircled by enemies, his heart melting like wax. But like the psalmist, it's not the mortal danger that appeared to give Jesus the most anguish, but the separation from God that took away all hope and meaning from his existence. And unlike the psalmist, Jesus wasn't delivered from his enemies but died at their hands. Does that mean that God really did abandon his son?

The answer is, of course, both yes and no. To understand the unique role of Jesus on the cross, we have to understand the origin of the term "scapegoat." Leviticus 16 describes the Jewish Day of Atonement, a ritual given to Moses and the Hebrew people after the Exodus. The ritual involves the selection of two goats, one of which is sacrificed as an offering to God, and the other sent away from the tabernacle into the wilderness, banished from God's presence and bearing the sins of the people with it.

"[Aaron] will lay both of his hands on the goat's head and confess over it all the wickedness, rebellion, and sins of the people of Israel. In this way, he will transfer the people's sins to the head of the goat. Then a man specially chosen for the task will drive the goat into the wilderness. As the goat goes into the wilderness, it will carry all the people's sins upon itself into a desolate land."⁸

⁷ Word Biblical Commentary: Psalms 1-50 (203). Word (1983).

⁸ Leviticus 16:21-22. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

So in this sense, God really did abandon Jesus on the cross. Once Jesus accepted the sins of the world into his mortal life, it became necessary for him to be separated from his Father, because sin is to God's holiness as oil is to water. We tend to think of the crucifixion in painful physical terms, and it certainly must have been, but it was the spiritual shock of carrying our sin that was especially unimaginable. Jesus, the ultimate scapegoat for humanity, died on a cross, and our sin died with him, as he cried out to his Father, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"⁹

Thankfully, that's not the end of the story, because although God didn't deliver Jesus *from* death, he did deliver him *through* death.¹⁰ There's so much good news in that! For one thing, we know that just as God raised Jesus into a new resurrection body, we too will be raised into a new life. But our hope isn't just for that future day. Because Jesus died as the final scapegoat for all people, we know that when we put our hope in the name and blood of Jesus, we can stand in God's presence in this life without fear of being abandoned by God, no matter how ugly our sin. Does that mean we all have a "get out of jail free" card that gives us license to do whatever we want? As the Apostle Paul said, "by no means!"¹¹ But it does mean that even in the direst of earthly circumstances, you can be confident that God hasn't abandoned you. God's holiness no longer requires that we be kept apart from the divine. In fact, God's loving kindness demands just the opposite. God wants to draw you close in prayer, and is wanting that for you even today.

Have you ever felt abandoned by God? Do you feel that way today? It can be so difficult to see the face of God in the midst of tragedy. And yet God has given us this charge in life: "[B]e strong and courageous! Do not be afraid and do not panic... For the LORD your God will personally go ahead of you. He will neither fail you nor abandon you."¹²

Please take some time now to reflect on God's promise to never abandon you. If you like, you can share a comment or a prayer.

⁹ Psalm 22:1. Ibid

¹⁰ Word Biblical Commentary: Psalms 1-50 (203). Word (1983).

¹¹ Romans 6:2. New International Version (2011).

¹² Deuteronomy 31:6. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)



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